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THE RELIGIOUS VIEWS OF EURIPIDES AS SHOWN IN THE "BACCHANALS."

THE "Bacchanals," apparently written by Euripides in his extreme old age and in Macedonia in an atmosphere wholly unlike that of Athens which he had left, contains religious views seemingly out of harmony with those expressed in his earlier dramas. And so, quite apart from the transcendent literary power of this magnificent play, "alone among extant Greek tragedies in picturesque splendor," so un-Greek in its enthusiastic proclaiming of man's affinity with nature, it has an importance in the development of religious thought in Greece. Its chief interest from this point of view is the long debated question whether it represents a recantation of earlier views of religion on the part of the aged poet.

At first glance the "Bacchanals" seems merely to record a phase of religious history—the victory of the late introduced cult of Dionysus into Greece. The wild and orgiastic rites of the primitive worship of the wine-god, though from the first exerting a powerful influence on the imagination of the people, could not have been accepted finally by the rational Greeks without great opposition. These exciting and secret rites, celebrated under cover of darkness and especially attracting the emotional natures of women, could never have gained their way in peace. The myth portrayed by Euripides, the persecution of the god in Thebes and his bloody revenge, seems to be but an echo of this

prehistoric conflict. This older worship, as Hartung remarks, "represents a return to the primitive condition of nature and a renunciation of civilization, that is, a renunciation of rational life regulated by morality and law and a return to the innocency of the wilderness. Hence the Maenads took fawns to their breasts and clad themselves in fawn-skins, to transform themselves, as it were, into roes; hence they crowned themselves with twigs of oak and fir, and ate raw flesh."¹

It represents, therefore, a period long prior to the historic epoch when this crude worship had become metamorphosed and spiritualized by the great reform of Orphism, which spread over Greece and South Italy in the sixth century B. C. Thereafter it was no longer the religion of primitive men, who, like the barbarous Thracians, had worshiped animals as gods and had actually torn and devoured beasts of the mountains during their orgies when under the spell of the god. Euripides, in his brilliant tragedy, knows nothing of this spirit of reform, but pictures the wilder scenes of the earlier worship.

A closer examination of the play shows there must have been a deeper motive than merely painting, though in such glorious colors, the story of the early history of the newly revealed faith. For the choral odes, among the most beautiful of Greek tragedy, are all deeply religious in tone and constantly denounce rationalism, τὸ σοφόν, i. e., the subtleties of the current philosophical speculations which were undermining traditional beliefs. In proportion as such knowledge is depreciated, is faith in the established religion inculcated. I will quote from the play a few of the more notable sentiments in illustration of this. Thus the chorus asserts the divine providence and moral government of the world in the two following

¹ *Bakchen*, p. 156 (translated by Beckwith in his edition of the play, p. 10, n. 1).

passages, which would be difficult to parallel elsewhere in the poet's works:

"Verily the gods dwelling in the ether still can view the affairs of men. Human wisdom is oft no wisdom, nor is the thinking upon things which are unfit for mortal minds."²

"Slowly but surely the strength divine is roused and punishes those of mortal men who honor folly's ends, and, urged on by madness, do not extol what belongs to the immortals. For cunningly the gods conceal the lazy foot of time and hunt out at last the impious man. For 'tis no profit to learn nor practise beyond the stablished customs."³

This same acceptance of old beliefs is again urged in these words:

"'Tis wise to keep both mind and heart from the lore of those who think themselves wise; whatever the common throng thinks and practises, that would I accept."⁴

Teiresias urges the same acceptance on Pentheus:

"Nor should we exalt mortal wisdom against that divine; our ancient traditions, which have existed from time immemorial, these no arguments shall overturn, nor the keenest subtleties of thought."⁵

The chorus praises the man who has renounced speculation, and who through the national faith has found knowledge of mysteries divine:

"Happy he who has 'scaped the storms of sea and reached his haven."⁶

"To preserve the mind in prudence and in a mood befitting mortals, brings a painless life to men who are ready to obey the behest of the gods."⁷

Human wisdom, however, is not to be neglected, but there are great mysteries beyond its ken:

"Wisdom I seek with diligence; but with joy I seek those other great things which direct our lives to what is good, both day and night teaching us to revere the gods and to throw aside all that violates the right."⁸

² 392 ff. The renderings are from my translation of the play published in *Records of the Past*, XI, Pt. 4, 1912.

³ 882 ff.

⁴ 427 ff.

⁵ 200 ff.

⁶ 902 f.

⁷ 1002 ff.

⁸ 1005 ff.

From the consideration of such sentiments, we are almost persuaded into the belief that the play was written with the avowed intention of overthrowing the enemies of religion, and as an apotheosis of the popular faith. On this theory the play is merely what the Germans would call a *Tendenz-Drama*, and the moral is not hard to point. The inadequacy of human wisdom is shown in the character of Pentheus who, though well-intentioned, is a defender of τὸ σοφόν merely, and so is closed to all influences from that greater mysterious wisdom of the unknown whose glorification seems to be the chief purpose of the drama. His opposition, then, is but a signal example of rationalism failing to accept the supernatural, and he becomes but a type of the shallow free-thinker who, in accordance with his earth-born descent, has no insight into the mysteries of heaven, a type engendered by the sophistic teaching of Euripides's day, against which both the poet and Socrates strove. To quote Professor Moulton: "The plot of the play illustrates the unhappy fate of Pentheus, how those who oppose the worship of the vine are opposing a hidden omnipotence; if the votaries are imprisoned, an earthquake overturns the prison, chains drop off spontaneously, and a fire breaks out that men strive to quench in vain; or the Maenads themselves with supernatural might overturn trees and scatter the limbs of oxen with their hands."⁹ It is just this contrast between the blindness of the Theban king, as seen in his scorn of the new superstition, and the hidden power of the god, which gives to the play its dramatic effect. His blindness drives him to madness and ultimately he rushes to his doom apparently with joy. Thus the whole intent of the drama appears to be didactic, that the acceptance of the national religion is the only true basis of human happiness and that the sceptical philosophy of the day is vicious and should be renounced.

⁹ *Ancient Classical Drama*, p. 117.

Now in most of his other plays Euripides has nothing but contempt for the traditional theology.¹⁰ This is most evident in the "Hippolytus," staged in 429 B. C., and in the equally powerful "Hercules Furens," which on grounds of style has been dated later, between 420 and 417 B. C. In the former the whole action of the plot is based upon a jealous feud between Aphrodite and Artemis. Because of a personal slight, the goddess of love inspires an ignoble passion in a mother for her step-son. Phaedra, who is one of the poet's noblest creations, Hippolytus and his father Theseus all become involved in an Olympian quarrel in which they are in no wise concerned. After the suicide of the mother and the destruction of the son, Euripides denounces the whole basis upon which the system of Olympus rests; for Artemis can not intercede for her favorite, though he has remained chaste, just because Aphrodite has willed it differently. Her own words are:

"For Kypris willed that all this should befall
To glut her spite, and this the Gods' wont is:—
None doth presume to thwart the fixed design
Willed by his fellow."¹¹

In the "Hercules Furens" the poet also shows that the legendary imperfections of the gods evoked neither his faith nor praise. Here the plot turns on Hera's malicious persecution of her step-son and throughout the drama we are persuaded that she alone is to blame for the hero's madness and the consequent murder of his wife and children. When Hercules at last awakens from his frenzy and realizes his awful deed, he cries out in scorn:

"To such a Goddess
Who shall pray now?—who, for a woman's sake
Jealous of Zeus, from Hellas cut off
Her benefactors, guiltless though they were."¹²

¹⁰ For his diatribe against the popular theology, see especially P. Decharme, *Euripide, et l'esprit de son théâtre* (Paris, 1893), Chap. 2; and cf. Verrall, *Euripides the Rationalist* (Cambridge, 1895), pp. 79-84.

¹¹ 1327 ff. (Way's translation).

¹² 1307 ff. (Way's translation).

Though the poet discloses the intriguing malevolence of the gods most clearly in these two plays, passages could be cited from all his other works in which they are held up to ridicule. Thus in the "Ion" Apollo is berated for lying and seduction;¹³ in the "Andromache" the same god out of spite permits the murder of Neoptolemus, though the latter has come as a suppliant to his shrine.¹⁴ In the "Electra"¹⁵ and "Orestes,"¹⁶ the murder of Clytemnestra, both its responsibility and consequences, is attributed to the Delphian god by Orestes, while in the "Iphigenia in Tauris"¹⁷ the hero openly declares that Phoebus has deceived him. The injustice of the gods is a constant theme of the poet,¹⁸ and the same iconoclastic spirit is seen in many of his dramas and fragments.¹⁹ In fact only the "Alcestis" and "Suppliants" seem wholly free from such utterances, and Athena, Dionysus and Eros are about the only immortals who are left unscathed by the poet's profane hand. But it is unnecessary to quote further in evidence of his contempt of the received theology. In a word we can say that he never tries to soften the imperfections of the gods nor to bring out their higher natures as Æschylus and Sophocles did. They tried to "pour new wine into old bottles," to work over the old myths into harmony with their own sentiments by glossing over all that was objectionable. But Euripides, in view of his wide separation from traditional views, seemed to find such a reconciliation out of the question, and so, instead of trying to tone down their features, he brought out their grossness with perfect fidelity only that he might attack them the better. The famous fragment which runs

"If the gods do anything evil, then they are not gods,"²⁰

¹³ 436 ff.

¹⁴ 1111 ff.

¹⁵ 1190 ff.

¹⁶ 591 ff.

¹⁷ 711.

¹⁸ E. g., "I. T.," 570 ff; "Troades," 469 f; "Herc. Fur.," 339 ff; "Cycl.," 355.

¹⁹ E. g., "I. T.," 572 and 380 ff; "Hecuba," 488 ff; "Troades," 884 f; frags. 483, 793 etc.

²⁰ Frag. 294, 7. Cf. the sentiment in "I. T.," 391.

might be said to sum up all his objections to the traditional religion of his countrymen; in it we find the *Grundgedanke*—to quote Nestle²¹—of his whole polemic against Greek polytheism. And if we contrast this fragment with one of Sophocles, which asserts that “The gods never lead us into evil,”²² we can gauge how essentially different was the point of view of these two contemporary poets. In one respect Greek drama was the gainer by Euripides’s iconoclasm: the ideal which he failed to find in the gods he looked for in humanity. To him we are indebted for ideal types of mankind—such as Theseus for chivalry, Hippolytus for chastity, Alcestis for conjugal devotion, and many another. In many passages he even seems to take delight in contrasting the goodness of mortals with the capricious selfishness of the immortals.

If, then, we compare such iconoclastic sentiments as these with the perfervid religious ones of the “Bacchanals,” the latter sound like a complete renunciation of speculative inquiry, like a retraction or “palinode” of earlier beliefs, or at least like an “eirenicon”—to use a phrase of James Adam²³—or attempt of the poet to set himself right with public opinion before his death. The spirit of ethical contentment and speculative repose evident throughout the play seems to show that he was at last weary of his doubts and subtleties and that he had found peace in that same religion which he had denounced all his life. It would be a most striking example of poetic justice if this most skeptical of poets finally returned to the faith of his youth and met his end in conformity with Socrates’s dictum “that a man should die in peace.”²⁴ Accordingly, in spite of the fact that men of seventy and more do not so

²¹ *Untersuchungen über d. philos. Quellen des Euripides*, 1902, p. 126; and cf. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers*, II, p. 13.

²² Frag. 226.

²³ *The Religious Teachers of Greece*, p. 312.

²⁴ Cf. “Phaedo,” 117E.

easily change their lifelong opinions, this "recantation" explanation of the drama has been upheld by many able critics, e. g., Nägelsbach, Paley, Pohle, Wecklein, Bernhardt, K. O. Müller, Berlage, Pater and very recently Gomperz. Walter Pater has expressed it in these words: "Writing in old age, he is in that subdued mood, . . . in which accustomed ideas, conformable to a sort of common sense regarding the unseen, oftentimes regain what they may have lost, in a man's allegiance. Euripides has said, or seemed to say, many things concerning Greek religion at variance with received opinion; and now, in the end of life, he desires to make his peace—what shall at any rate be peace with men. He is in a mood for acquiescence, or even for a palinode."²⁵

However, this interpretation has had many equally strong opponents since Hartung first attacked it in 1844 in his *Euripides restitutus*, e. g., Roux, Patin, Bruhn, Nestle, Pfander, Tyrrel, Jebb, Decharme, Christ and Murray. The latter goes so far as to say that to look upon the play as "a reactionary manifesto in favor of orthodoxy is a view which hardly merits refutation."²⁶ In consequence, though many have been content merely to point out the vagueness and inconsistency of the poet,²⁷ others have offered very positive explanations of the purpose of the drama. The older view of Roux,²⁸ that the play is really a polemic against the popular faith, a thinly veiled criticism not only of the Dionysiac cult but of religion in general, has been revived in recent years.²⁹ Thus the scornful reply of Agave to Dionysus toward the end of the play,

²⁵ From his essay on the "Bacchanals," in *Greek Studies*.

²⁶ *Ancient Greek Literature*, p. 272.

²⁷ E. g., T. Rumpel, *De Euripidis atheismo*, Halle, 1839; J. Janske, *De philosophia Euripidis*, Breslau, 1857; and more recently Lewis Campbell, *Religion in Greek Literature*, London, 1898.

²⁸ E. Roux, *Du merveilleux dans la tragédie grecque*, Paris, 1846.

²⁹ E. g., by H. Patin, *Euripide*, Paris, 1894; E. Bruhn, in his edition of the *Bacchae*, Berlin, 1891.

" 'Tis not meet that gods nurse their anger like men."³⁰

has been taken as the starting-point for a reinterpretation of the piece on ironical grounds, on the theory that the poet spoke his own mind and meaning only in this one verse.³¹ Similarly, the culminating motive of the play, Agave returning in triumph from her unwitting murder of her son, has been explained in an ironical light.³² Still others³³ have discovered signs of malicious irony in the mystic legend of Dionysus contained in verses 286-297, though it has been pointed out often enough that the long speech of Teiresias in praise of the god as the giver of wine, inspirer of prophets and author of panics in armies (verses 266-327) could hardly have been interrupted by these verses which introduce a legend having nothing in common with the context. Consequently, most editors have rejected the passage,³⁴ and even if kept it should be looked upon merely as an account of the cult theology.³⁵ By a like process of reasoning the preceding speech of Pentheus (verses 242-7) has also been rejected. It is probable that the two passages in question were composed with reference to each other and added later. Other critics have found comic features in the character-drawing of Teiresias, especially in the passage in which the old seer describes Pentheus's madness (verses 200ff).³⁶

³⁰ 1348.

³¹ This is the view of Decharme, *op. cit.*; he is followed by H. Weil, *Etudes sur le drame antique*, Paris, 1897, and C. Lindskog, *Studien zum antiken Drama*, Lund, 1897.

³² E. g., suggested by Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-310.

³³ E. g., G. Dalmeyda, *Ausgangspunkt der Bakchen*, Paris, 1908.

³⁴ It was kept, however, by both K. O. Müller, and Paley (*Eurip.*, Vol. II, p. 393). Dindorf rejected it because of its "*dictio inepta confusa omninoque non Euripidea*," and because it interrupts the context; he is followed by Tyrrel and others.

³⁵ As the following have done: Weil, *Etudes*, p. 113f; R. Hirzel, *Berichte der sächs. Gesell. der Wiss.*, XLVIII, 1896, p. 294; Christ, *Gesch. der griech. Litt.*, 6th ed., 1912, p. 374, n. 4.

³⁶ E. g., P. Girard, *Rev. des études grecques*, XVII, 1904, pp. 175f, in connection with a fantastic attempt to join the three plays which were brought out in the year after the death of Euripides (the "Iphigenia in Aulis," "Alcmaeon"

But is the real intention of the "Bacchanals" to be explained on either the "recantation" or "irony" theory? As for the latter, it may be said at once that with the exception of the line in question (1348) there is not a single other indication in the play of any of the blasphemous expressions which are so common in the poet's other works, and that instead of betraying any criticism of the wine-god or his cult, the entire drama extols his might with the utmost warmth and vigor. In fact it is extolled with such seriousness that Euripides cannot be said to give an unbiased account of the struggle between Pentheus and the hidden power of the god. For though his human sympathies are certainly with the unhappy upholder of "reason," just as they were with Hippolytus in the earlier play, still he seems to be wholly within the influence of the religious antagonism to reason, and to be writing as a subjective believer in the religious views expressed. Of course a good deal of this attitude can be explained by his desire to give a powerful and effective stage setting to the play.

On the other hand the advocates of the "palinode" theory are obliged to assume an essential change in the poet's attitude toward religion, and so to look upon the "Bacchanals" as a sort of death-bed confession of earlier heresies. But are we justified in assuming any such repentant relapse of the aged poet into the old epic orthodoxy which he had impugned all his life long? This was the view of Bernhardt³⁷ and Nägelsbach³⁸ long ago and has been recently revived by Gomperz,³⁹ who thinks that in this way the poet wished to atone for his "*Abfall vom Genius seines Volkes*."

and "Bacchanals") in a *trilogie libre*. His "comic" theory has found adherents in Dalmeyda (*op. cit.*) and Ö. Schröder, *Zeitschr. für Gymnasialwesen*, LXIV, 1910, p. 193.

³⁷ *Griech. Litt.*, II, 2.

³⁸ *Nachhomerische Theologie*, Nürnberg, 1857, p. 463ff.

³⁹ *Griech. Denker*, II, 12.

Though the utterances of the chorus and the fate of Pentheus protest that speculative philosophy must be renounced, still it is perfectly clear that the poet's conception of Dionysus is rationalistic, and that he is pictured as in no sense a personal god. As Gilbert Murray has said: "If Dionysus is a personal god at all, he is a devil."⁴⁰ On any such theory the whole moral purpose of the play would be vitiated. But the god is nothing more than a personified principle, a rationalized idea, like the conception of Aphrodite in the "Hippolytus." Thus Teiresias, in his effort to convert Pentheus, says:

"But two things, oh youth, find worth among mankind; first our goddess Demeter; for she is earth, call her by what name thou wilt; 'tis she who nourishes men with food; but now Semele's offspring hath given us that liquid strength hidden in the grape, a boon to men, for it assuages the grief of wretched mortals so soon as they are filled with the sweetness of the vine; and it grants sleep, oblivious of daily toil, for forgetfulness is their only cure; and this gift of Bacchus is poured out in libation to the gods and through its means men are blessed."⁴¹

We should remember that the Theban seer always speaks with authority in Greek tragedy and is generally the mouthpiece of the dramatist, and so this rationalistic conception of Dionysus was doubtless Euripides's own. The sophist Prodicus had already conceived of Dionysus as the apotheosis of wine and Demeter of corn, and had identified Poseidon with water, Hephaestus with fire, etc. Cicero—who quotes his teaching in the *De natura deorum*, I, 118—looked upon this personification of the gods as natural objects as a complete denial of religion. So Euripides looked upon Dionysus merely as a principle—the embodiment of enthusiasm, not only the god of wine, but, in Adam's words, "a higher personification of passion in religion and joy in life,"—such a principle as that

⁴⁰ *Anc. Greek Lit.*, p. 272.

⁴¹ 274ff.

described by Plato in the "Phaedrus," where Socrates, in distinguishing good from evil madness, mentions four kinds of the former, the third of which he calls "poetic" madness. He says it takes "hold of a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyrical and all other numbers."⁴² This poetic madness is best illustrated by the "Bacchanals," though there are indications in the play of the other varieties of madness as well. As Adam has observed, there is no other Greek poem in which the writer is so "possessed."⁴³

Though Euripides was no consistent follower of Orphism, still he was interested in its mystic and ascetic phases, as we know from the fact that he devoted at least one play—the lost "Cretans"—to this subject. The two gods or "principles" of that sect, Dionysus and Eros, were always reverently treated in his plays. It may be that the early associations of his birthplace Phlye in Attica, where mysteries were celebrated in honor of Demeter and Core as well as Eros, the cosmic spirit of Orphism, influenced his attitude toward mysticism, just as Æschylus was influenced by the mysteries celebrated at his birthplace Eleusis. These gods, Dionysus and Eros, were nothing but "potencies" to the Orphics. As Miss Harrison has said:

"The religion of Orpheus is religious in the sense that it is the worship of the real mysteries of life, of potencies (δαίμονες) rather than personal gods (θεοί); it is the worship of life itself in its supreme mysteries of ecstasy and love. . . . In ancient Greek religion these (Bacchus and Eros) are the only real gods. Orpheus dimly divined the truth later to become explicit through Euripides. . . . It is these real gods, this life itself, that the Greeks, like most men, were inwardly afraid to recognize and face, afraid even to worship. . . . Now and again a philosopher or poet, in the very spirit of Orpheus, proclaims these true gods,

⁴² 245 (Jowett).

⁴³ *Op. cit.*, p. 315.

and asks in wonder why to their shrines is brought no sacrifice."⁴⁴

Since, then, Dionysus in the "Bacchanals" is conceived merely as the rationalized principle of enthusiasm, it is clear that the main problem of the play is not a question of skepticism against orthodoxy, but the relative value of "reason" and "enthusiasm" in life.⁴⁵ So the whole purport of the play is epitomized in such utterances as these which have already been quoted: "Human wisdom is oft no wisdom"; "Nor should we exalt mortal wisdom against that divine." Rationalism is denounced as insufficient; human knowledge, though valuable, is infinitesimally small in comparison with the great mysterious knowledge beyond, but yet it must not be neglected; "Wisdom I seek with diligence (τὸ σοφὸν οὐ φθονῶ); but with joy I seek those other great things which direct our lives to what is good." We must bear in mind that the rationalism which the poet here condemns is only that of the sophists, the same which he had condemned long before in the "Hippolytus" and "Medea." There is something greater than this, and that is religious exaltation, which he offers as the true wisdom. As Gilbert Murray says: "Reason is great but it is not everything. There are in the world things not of reason, but both below and above it; causes of emotion, which we cannot express, which we tend to worship, which we feel perhaps to be the precious elements in life. These things are gods or forms of God; not fabulous immortal men, but 'Things which are,' things utterly non-human and non-moral, which bring man bliss or tear his life to shreds without a break in their own serenity."⁴⁶ He goes on to say that this is the kind of religion against which

⁴⁴ *Prolegomena to Greek Religion*, p. 658. In the "Symposium" of Plato, 189, Aristophanes says mankind has never understood the power of Eros, else they would have built him great shrines. In the "Hippolytus," the chorus sings a similar refrain, 538ff.

⁴⁵ Cf. Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 316, whom I follow in this connection.

⁴⁶ *Anc. Greek Lit.*, p. 272.

Tolstoy preached, which Bentham and Paley tried to abolish, and which Plato denounced and followed. And in a more recent work the same writer has given the rational basis of the Dionysiac worship in these words: "Dionysus was a fiction, the ritual of Dionysus a reality—the reality in fact out of which the fiction was developed or projected. It is the ritual of the spring, of the New Year, of *le renouveau*—the renewal after the dead winter of all the life of the world. . . . Further, if we would understand Dionysus-worship, we must realize that these vegetation-cults and all their grossness were bound up with the things that are the most beautiful in the world."⁴⁷ This true basis of the Dionysiac worship as the negation of rationality was felt by Euripides when writing this play, which pictures so passionately the sympathy of mankind with nature.

From this view-point of the rationalistic conception of the wine-god, the question as to whether the god or one of his priests played the chief rôle in the drama does not have the importance which many have thought. Doubtless the gap in the one manuscript preserving the play—ending with verse 1330, in which Dionysus continues his prophecy from the *theologeion*—would, if recovered, settle the question finally as to whether the Lydian stranger was Dionysus or a preacher of the new religion. However rationalistic Euripides's conception of Dionysus was, we should not forget that to an Athenian audience Dionysus was a personal god. Now he is portrayed as a human character throughout the action of the play; and to avoid the shearing and binding scene, which would have appeared repugnant in a theater whose representations were merely acts of homage to the god, we are justified in looking upon the comely stranger as a priest or an adept of the common type, inspired, if you like, to perform miracles which the ordinary stage-machinery of the day could have easily

⁴⁷ From *Greek and English Tragedy: A Contrast*.

represented. Nor are we obliged to explain features in the action of the play,—as, e. g., the destruction of the palace—on any theory of hypnotism of the audience as has been attempted recently.⁴⁸ Thus, it is more reasonable to assume that the god appeared only in the prologue and epilogue as is customary in the dramas of Euripides. But the loss of the passage in question is irreparable from a wholly different cause. We have lost almost the whole of Agave's speech, for it breaks off after the first verse (1329). The scene represented a frenzied mother who had unconsciously slain her son and transfixed his head on a spear; she slowly recovers her sanity and laments over the dead body. In so heart-rending a scene as this, the poet must have furnished a perfect example of Aristotle's idea of a "recognition."⁴⁹ If we compare the sentiment of this lost speech with that of Hecuba wailing over the body of Astyanax as preserved in the "Troades," we can imagine how effectively this most sympathetic of poets must have rendered so terrible a situation, perhaps the most moving he ever wrote, and we can thus form some idea of our loss.⁵⁰

So if it was the intention of Euripides in the "Bacchanals" to portray Dionysus as a rational principle and thus to denounce the pretensions of a false philosophy as inadequate, the play is in no sense a reaction toward dogmatic orthodoxy. A study of his other dramas shows that though he was a disbeliever in the traditional theology, he had never actually denied the essential basis of religion. Though "by nature a destroyer of illusions,"⁵¹ he probably

⁴⁸ As in G. Norwood's *Riddle of the Bacchae*, 1908.

⁴⁹ "Poetics," 1454a².

⁵⁰ Two passages in Apsines, a writer on rhetoric (*Rhet. Gr.*, IX, pp. 587 and 590, ed. Walz) gives us a faint idea of the purport of the speech. The author of *Christus Patiens*—wrongly ascribed to Gregory of Nazianzus—also probably had the missing portion before him. Hartung (*Euripides restitutus*) and Kirchhoff (*Philol.*, VIII, pp. 78-93) have reconstructed several lines of the lost passage of the "Bacchanals" from that drama.

⁵¹ Croiset (*Hist. de la littérature grecque*, I, p. 313) says of him: "*C'était par nature un destructeur d'illusions.*"

never expressed disbelief in the idea of deity. It is true that his fellow Athenians looked upon him as a free-thinker; Aristophanes has testified to their opinion in a famous passage in the "Thesmophoriazusae" in which a poor widow accuses the poet of depriving her of her livelihood—she was a weaver of sacrificial chaplets—by his teaching that there are no gods.⁵² And the more famous fragment from the lost "Bellerophon," preserved to us by Justin Martyr,⁵³

"Doth any say there are Gods in heaven?
Nay, there are none,"

has also been urged to prove the poet's disbelief in deity. But we have no idea of the context in which this fragment occurred; if the succeeding line were preserved, quite possibly its whole meaning would be different. We must be on our guard against accepting such fragments as conclusive evidence because of their disjointed nature and the fact that they are often tinged with Christian or Jewish interpolations.⁵⁴ It is always perplexity and doubt rather than positive disbelief which are the burden of many another passage. Thus in the "Helena" the chorus complains that no one can tell

"What is God, or what is not God, or that which lies between."⁵⁵

In the "Hercules Furens" the famous doubt is expressed:

"Zeus, whoever Zeus is."⁵⁶

And the same agnosticism meets us in this line of the "Orestes":

⁵² 445ff.

⁵³ Frag. 288; see his "De Monarchia," ch. 5.

⁵⁴ Tyrrell (in his edition of the *Bacchae*, p. XXIII) cites frag. 256 (from the lost "Achelaus," which probably reflected a similar mental state as the "Bacchanals") as in itself evidencing the poet's dissatisfaction with the moral government of the world, a sentiment fortunately condemned in the preserved answer. He also notes that frag. 852 is of Jewish or Christian origin.

⁵⁵ 1327.

⁵⁶ 1263f, repeated in frag. 483. Adam (p. 444) remarks that "Greek writers not infrequently represent the Highest God as the inscrutable one whose name is not lightly to be spoken" and cites the "Troades," 885, and Plato's "Euthyphron," 12A, as examples.

"In thralldom to the Gods we live, whoever the Gods may be."⁵⁷

He seemed to be constantly thwarted by the obscurity of everything connected with theology. Orestes's remark in the *Iphigenia in Tauris*,

"In things divine great confusion reigns,"⁵⁸

might be quoted as a summary of his doubts. That there is no way, either by divination or otherwise, to learn the will of the gods whose purpose is ever invisible to man, is a common sentiment of the poet.⁵⁹ Iphigenia says:

"For all the acts of the gods move on invisibly and no one knows anything clearly."⁶⁰

But such isolated passages—many of which are put into the mouths of actors only to be denounced—can only be interpreted in the light of his teaching as a whole. His polemic was aimed against the anthropomorphic ideas of the gods held by his countrymen, and so he came to be looked upon as an atheist. Whether he believed in ideal gods it is hard to determine, for here the evidence is again vacillating; sometimes he seems to believe and sometimes not. But that he had arrived at certain definite assumptions as to the true nature of the godhead, whose various names—Ether, Law, Necessity, Justice, Reason—are but attributes of the one all-embracing infinite substance, can be shown by adducing many passages in which the poet maintains that the gods must furnish a moral standard for men, that the notions of hegemony and clashing wills implied in polytheism are wrong and that the divine nature is self-sufficient.⁶¹ Iphigenia cannot believe that Artemis really enjoys human sacrifices, but argues that the barbarous Taurians have attributed their own murderous customs to the goddess, and finally says:

⁵⁷ 418.

⁵⁸ 572.

⁵⁹ E. g., "H. F.," 62; "Hel.," 744-5; "Alc.," 785f.

⁶⁰ "I. T.," 476-7; cf. Solon, frag. 16 (Hiller).

⁶¹ E. g., "H. F.," 1307ff; and 1342ff; "I. T.," 385ff; "Ion," 442ff; frag. 1130, etc.

"None of the gods I ween is evil or doeth wrong,"⁶²

a sentiment which can be looked upon as the central idea in Euripides's constructive theology. That he believed that justice would finally guide all things to their goal is clear from the beautiful prayer which Hecuba makes to Zeus in the "Troades," ending:

"...for treading soundless paths
In justice dost thou guide all mortal things."⁶³

Thus Euripides did not reject the basic facts of religion but tried to interpret them in a way which would be in harmony with a belief in the benevolence of the divine nature.

Though the theology of the "Bacchanals," then, is conceived mainly in the same rational spirit which we see in his earlier works, still no one can read the play without being convinced that some great change has come over the religious attitude of the poet, who with such youthful fire and in such passionate language thus proclaims the power of this irresistible world-embracing divinity, which differs so essentially from the old Olympian gods. For this change⁶⁴ I think we should look almost wholly to the circumstances of the composition of the play in Macedonia, the home of the Dionysiac cult. In writing for a Macedonian audience it was but fitting that Euripides should have chosen for his subject the worship of their great god. Frequent allusions to the country clearly show his desire to compliment his friend and host Archelaus.⁶⁵ And the wholly un-Greek character of the play—only matched, perhaps, among his other works by the "Orestes"—was far better suited to the genius of this land of orgiastic worship

⁶² "I. T.," 391; cf. the same thought in "Troades," 987ff.

⁶³ 887-8 (Way).

⁶⁴ Against the view of, e. g., Decharme, Weil, Tyrrell, Nestle (*Philol.*, 58, 1899, p. 362f) and most radically, Lindskog; the change is assumed by Christ and others.

⁶⁵ E. g., Pieria, 410 and 565; "Olympus," 561; the "Axius," 569, and "Lydias," 571.

and mystic ceremonies than to the more temperate states of Greece. The old poet, weary of his logical subtleties and lifelong doubts, has finally found peace in a form of mysticism—the mystic worship of Dionysus, whose real nature was first made clear to him here far from Athens, where he is now breathing an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. As Jebb has said: “The really striking thing in the ‘Bacchae’ is the spirit of contentment and of composure which it breathes,—as if the poet had ceased to be vexed by the seeming contradictions which had troubled him before.”⁶⁶ The tendency toward mysticism,⁶⁷ long dormant in him, has at length asserted its power and now has full reign. He has finally, contrary to his custom, adopted the spirit of an enthusiastic convert; we are persuaded that he is convinced of all that he so passionately writes; the entire drama is pervaded with the exaltation of an overpowering vision.⁶⁸ Dominated by the new enthusiasm, he has returned to the peaceful worship of nature and no longer lets his feelings be restrained by any ethical or reflective doubts. James Adam has finely said: “No other ancient poem shows so rapturous a feeling of the kinship between man and nature. The very hills are thrilled with ecstasy in sympathy with the frenzied votaries of the god.”⁶⁹ We feel that Dionysus has become a power pulsating throughout the whole of nature, both inorganic and organic, making the universe into a living, breathing whole; and we are stirred with a new sense of unification with the mystery

⁶⁶ *Encycl. Brit.* (11th ed.), art. “Euripides.”

⁶⁷ Christ (*op. cit.*, p. 375) has found traces of this mystic tendency in his earlier dramas, e. g., in the “Ion,” where the mystical renunciation of the world is glorified; in the character drawing of Eteocles in the “Phoenissae”; and in the “Cyclops,” where rationalism is exposed. Recently Gomperz (II, p. 15) thinks he sees the same attitude of mind in the “Hippolytus.”

⁶⁸ He is so much in sympathy with his subject that some have argued that he merely intended to terrorize his audience—whether Macedonian or Athenian—into a revival of the neglected worship of Dionysus; cf. Campbell, p. 309.

⁶⁹ In reference to the words of the messenger describing the revels on Cithaeron, 726ff: “And soon the whole mountain and the wild beasts were in a tumult, and all was in motion through their running hither and thither.”

that surrounds us.”⁷⁰ He likens this religion of the “Bacchanals” to the “added dimension of emotion,” the “new reach of freedom” discussed by William James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*.⁷¹ It is this which makes the play a religious one. In a word it is “faith,” which Professor Verrall says is the one thing new in the play, the thing which differentiates it not only from every other drama of Euripides, but from everything else in Greek literature, “the thing, the human phenomenon. . . . which is, in one word, faith or a faith—religion as we mostly now conceive it, exclusive in belief and universal in claim, enthusiastic, intolerant, and eager to conquer the world.”⁷² Though the phenomenon is common enough to us, it was apparently unknown to the Greece of the poet’s time and was first revealed to him in his last days in Macedonia.

It is this, then,—the praise of enthusiasm and inspiration in nature, the personification of exultation in life and emotion in religion—which forms the chief motive of this strange play. The victory of Dionysus over Pentheus, that is, the victory of enthusiasm over reason, the showing up of the defects of human wisdom in comparison with the greater knowledge of the mysterious unknown, all this teaches a lesson no less plain than that disclosed by the victory of Aphrodite in the “Hippolytus” written twenty-three years before. In these two companion plays, two great facts of nature, enthusiasm and love, are personified. These are two great necessities of our human natures, sources of happiness for weary mortals, and they cannot be reasoned away on any rational grounds, nor can they be disregarded without terrible effects, as is exemplified in the fate of both Pentheus and Hippolytus. Euripides

⁷⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 317. His explanation of the play on the theory of Macedonian influence I have followed in the main.

⁷¹ P. 48.

⁷² *The Bacchanals of Euripides and Other Essays* (1910), p. 159.

constantly denounced every form of superstition; at the same time he was always opposed to a dogmatic rationalism; and so the "Bacchanals," written at the end of his life, is in a sense the summing up of his position.

Whether the new vision, which seems to have taken such complete hold of the poet, would have been lasting had he enjoyed a longer lease of life, is another question. Even in the play itself are indications of the old iconoclastic spirit reappearing; for example toward the end, in the brief colloquy between Dionysus and Agave,⁷³ the latter answers with disdain in the line already quoted,

"'Tis not meet that gods nurse their anger like men."

And that after all the Greek gods are but the contemptible puppets of a vast and indefinable fate is attested by the final verses—which are also appended to several other plays⁷⁴—and which doubtless contain the poet's true sentiments: "Many are the forms of things divine, and many things unhop'd for the gods bring to pass. Both what was expected has not been fulfilled and of the unexpected God has found a solution. So hath it happened here."⁷⁵ In the "Hippolytus," Phaedra, father and son are all pictured as the puppets of divine caprice; here at the end of the "Bacchanals" Euripides goes a step further and makes not only Pentheus, Agave and the rest puppets of the gods, but the gods puppets of fate.

Thus the play, powerful though it is, contains just such conflicting views as his other works, and so is a true child of the poet. For Euripides, though his dramas were a tremendous factor in carrying on the protest against traditional views of religion which had been inaugurated the preceding century by Xenophanes and Heraclitus, made but little effort to construct a new theology. His mind

⁷³ 1345ff.

⁷⁴ I. e., the "Alcestis," "Medea," "Helena," "Andromache."

⁷⁵ 1388ff.

was essentially curious and impressionable to every influence; every thing—nature, society, humanity, religion, philosophy—appealed to him. A recent student of his philosophy has observed that there was scarcely a problem of his day, scarcely a theory in Greek thought before or during his lifetime, of which he did not take account.⁷⁶ But though he raised every question he gave a conclusive answer to none, and contented himself with throwing out a crowd of suggestions which at best seem only tentative gropings, and when taken together neither form a consistent whole nor are ruled by any one principle. As Croiset says: "*C'était une intelligence vive et pénétrante plutôt que forte.*"⁷⁷ It is quite possible that he had no definite views on religion; he was too great a thinker to yield to the temptation of any one solution, and so like many other great minds he took refuge in mysticism. His nature did not yearn for moral and intellectual anchorage, like that of Sophocles—evidence his shifting, almost kaleidoscopic views of the soul's future: sometimes he simply considers that the problem cannot be solved;⁷⁸ again he favors the view of Anaxagoras that it was a dreamless sleep, denying the survival of consciousness;⁷⁹ or he paints the usual epic gloomy region of never-ending night;⁸⁰ there are passages also in which he asserts that the spirits of the dead still feel with the living,⁸¹ and in others he seems to maintain the Orphic conception, that life is death to the soul and that death is life.⁸² This inconsistency in his views impresses us more than any other feature of his mind except his pessimism. As Gomperz puts it: "He delighted to suffer each shifting breath of opinion in turn to seize upon and move his soul."⁸³ In his defence

⁷⁶ Nestle, *op. cit.*, 560.

⁷⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 313.

⁷⁸ "Hippol.," 192ff.

⁷⁹ Cf. "Troades," 631ff.

⁸⁰ Cf. Frag. 536.

⁸¹ Cf. "Electra," 677; "Orestes," 1237.

⁸² Cf. Frag. 830 and 639. Cf. on the subject of his eschatological ideas, Adam, *op. cit.*, pp. 306ff.

⁸³ *Op. cit.*, II, p. 13.

we must remember his life was cast in a period of changing and conflicting thought; the old order of things was passing, but the new was not yet firmly established. It was his destiny to stimulate, to interest, rather than to actually instruct; for his mind was not vigorous enough to embody a system of principles and to cling to them. He was a thinker but hardly a philosopher; and first and last he was a poet, and so in accordance with the Greek idea a teacher also. For Plato says in a beautiful passage that the poets "are to us in a manner the fathers and authors of wisdom."⁸⁴ And Aristophanes had already expressed a similar thought when he said that the poet "should conceal what is evil and neither bring it forward nor teach it. For just as children have teachers to direct them, so poets are teachers for grown people."⁸⁵ So the religious views of a Pindar, an Æschylus or Euripides, influenced the people deeply. In the "Bacchanals" there seems to be no trace of the great problem which constantly perplexed Euripides—the reconciliation of an imperfectly ruled world with the idea of a benevolent God. But its absence in this play is no guarantee that he had finally found its solution; more probably he never found any light to bring into harmony his intellectual doubts and his moral yearnings. Doubtless much of the pessimism which is evident in many of his plays—a pessimism which at times is synonymous with hopeless despair—is to be explained by this lack of unity.⁸⁶

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* "Lysis," 214.

* "Frogs," 1053ff.

* E. g., in the "Hercules Furens," "Hecuba," "Troades," "Andromache" and especially in frag. 452. Adam, p. 311, argues that this pessimism is not entirely due to the political and social changes of the poet's day, for Sophocles, his contemporary, was not affected by it; Gomperz, II, p. 10, ascribes it to the growth of reflection as well as to the unrest of the transition age in which Euripides lived.